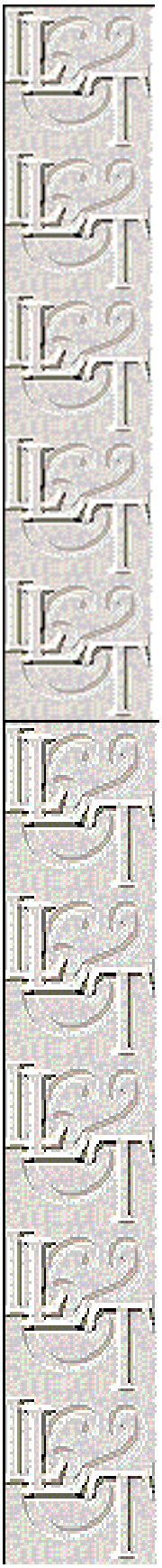
September 2000, Volume 4, Number 2
p. 2-4 online
(page numbers in PDF differ and should not be used for reference)



FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

It is a privilege and pleasure to introduce this special issue on "Literacies and Technologies." I must begin with a word of explanation about the title. It has been recognized in recent years that "literacy" cannot be usefully characterized in blanket terms as a universally homogeneous concept, given the great diversity of literacy practices that exist across discourse communities. Instead, many scholars have proposed that we might more fruitfully think in terms of multiple literac*ies*--roughly defined as dynamic, culturally and historically situated practices of using and interpreting diverse written (and spoken) texts to fulfill particular social purposes. The plural term is particularly apt as we consider literacy practices in relation to shifts in writing technologies (here again, plural, since we are concerned with multiple ways of fashioning implements, practicing the art and skill of writing, and extracting or collecting written materials). Hence the use of plurals in the title.

Of particular relevance in this issue is the relationship between computer technology and literacy practices. As increasing numbers of people rely on computers in their day-to-day lives, researchers and educators must reconsider a host of questions about how we communicate, how we understand notions of authorship and authority, how we gain entry into electronically mediated communities, and how we represent ourselves in those communities. What does it mean to be "literate" in an age of electronically mediated communication? What do historical relationships between technologies and literacy practices augur for the computer age? How do notions of "text," "reader," and "writer" change as new media, new communities, and new uses of literacy take hold? What kinds of meaning-making abilities do people need in order to participate successfully in virtual communities? How, and in what contexts, do people acquire these meaning-making abilities? What is the role of teachers and educational institutions in fostering the needed kinds of abilities?

These questions shape the three principal themes of this special issue:

1. *Literacy and technological change:* the history of relationships between technologies of writing and literacy practices and the social dynamics of change in literacy technologies
2. *Reading, writing in electronic environments:* the emergence of new discourse practices and genres in computer-mediated communication; the reframing of questions of authorship, authority, and identity; and the acquisition of multimedia interpretation and authoring abilities
3. *Pedagogy of electronic literacies:* proposed goals of teaching electronic literacies within language curricula; the design and implementation of appropriate learning tasks; and the evaluation of learner performance

Addressing the first theme, Denise Murray's "Changing Technologies, Changing Literacy Communities?" takes a critical historical perspective on the relationship between technologies and literacies. Murray argues on the one hand that technologies are not at the root of social or cognitive changes (as people commonly assume), but rather they amplify particular values and beliefs that a society already holds. On the other hand, she argues that if all tools reflect social values and practices, their full social meaning is generally not evident when they are first introduced, but develops only through their use in society. Murray takes these as starting points in her discussion of the role of computer technology in society in general, and its implications for literacy in particular. At the heart of her argument is a conviction that the outcomes of computer-

based literacy will be neither inevitable nor ideologically neutral, and that we, as educators, hold a special responsibility to understand and to help shape the ideological climate that will influence how computers are used in our lives.

Bridging the first two themes, Cameron Richards ("Hypermedia, Internet Communication, and the Challenge of Redefining Literacy in the Electronic Age") takes a theoretical perspective on shifts in typologies of discourse, with a particular emphasis on hypermedia and computer-mediated communication. Richards argues that hypermedia models of electronic discourse that adopt an informational focus are too narrowly construed and are plagued by internal contradictions. In an attempt to move beyond strict dichotomies (e.g., spoken vs. written language; image vs. text; immediacy vs. distantiation; social communion vs. alienation) in the development of typologies of network communication, Richards draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur to propose a broader, communications-based framework for the analysis of electronic discourse. Within this perspective, Richards proposes a dialogical "rhetoric of design" that would help us to view literacy as a dialogical process (whatever the mode and medium of communication) and to better understand the rhetorical uses and abuses of electronic media.

The third article, "Authenticity and Authorship in the Computer-Mediated Acquisition of L2 Literacy," by Claire Kramsch, Francine A'Ness, and Wan Shun Eva Lam, links all three themes. Although the authors focus squarely on the theme of reading and writing in electronic environments, they do so in terms of a broad theoretical and historical context of technological change, and their conclusions have important implications for pedagogy. Kramsch, A'Ness, and Lam critically interrogate the stability of two pillars of communicative language teaching--authenticity of input and authorship of the language use--in the context of computer-mediated language use. They focus their study on two virtual environments: a multimedia CD-ROM authored by American college learners of Spanish, and the Internet relay chat and Web page of a Chinese high school learner of English. The authors argue that as a function of the physical properties of the electronic medium and the nature of students' engagement with it, the textual and the social are brought into creative tension with each other and language use becomes "verbal art." What gets negotiated is not just information, but ultimately "the representation of self and other." The authors conclude that as one moves from print literacy to electronic literacy the key notions of authenticity and authorship should be reframed in terms of agency and identity, and they speculate that computer technology may restore the value of role play, theatricality, fictionalization in language learning.

The final two articles focus on the theme of pedagogy. Loretta Kasper ("New Technologies, New Literacies: Focus discipline research and ESL learning communities") argues that content-based instruction can be highly effective in helping ESL students develop the literacies they need to be successful in academic and workforce environments. Drawing on the work of the New London Group and others, Kasper describes a "focus discipline research" program in which students are encouraged to use English to gather, synthesize, evaluate, and articulate interdisciplinary information and knowledge and in which students are sensitized to sociolinguistic conventions related to audience and purpose. Kasper describes a classroom study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of a content-based pedagogy of focus discipline research, and concludes that it has been successful in strengthening ESL learners' competence in each of the functional, academic, critical, and electronic literacies deemed necessary for a successful academic experience at her institution.

And finally, in "The Role of Tasks in Promoting Intercultural Learning in Electronic Learning Networks," Andreas Müller-Hartmann explores what happens when language learners from different countries are brought together through the Internet to learn about one another's cultures by discussing young adult novels or plays they read in common. Presenting a study of individually organized e-mail exchanges between classrooms in Germany, the United States, and Canada, Müller-Hartmann focuses in particular on the crucial role that teacher-specified tasks play in facilitating 11th and 12th grade high school students' learning electronic interaction. The goal of his study was to examine the particular ways in which task properties, setting, teacher and learner roles, and the structure of learners' e-mail exchanges influenced intercultural learning.

All five articles in this issue represent a major effort to rethink traditional notions and practices, with an end goal of improving our understanding of language learning and teaching. I hope that you will enjoy reading them as much as I have, and we look forward to your responses.

Richard Kern

Guest Editor